CHAPTER 6

Religion and Critical Theory

Introduction

In *Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* Gouldner wrote a section titled “The Piety of Functionalism.” Gouldner argues that functionalism in general and Talcott Parsons in particular possess a distinctively religious ethos. The argument hinges on how Comte, in his formulation of both positivism and sociology, was seeking desperately to shore up the social group’s hold over the individual in the wake of cultural trends, which suggested the rise of atomistic individualism. With ongoing secularization, there was a concern that the morality of the group, originally assured through the solidarity of the religious congregation, could no longer be assured. Comte tried to figure out some way of maintaining the morality of the group through consensus building and the shoring up of attachments between like-minded individuals, but stripped of the religious ideas which had effectively kept humanity in the dark. The solution was to build a new secular religion of humanity, utilizing the methods and approaches of the natural sciences to better understand the human condition. Since the mass public was ignorant or apathetic about gaining better knowledge about the social world, it would be up to a new cadre of technocrats who had the wherewithal to understand the positive principles and put them into practice to attain the good society.

For Gouldner, Parsons and functionalism were the immediate heirs to this religion of humanity envisioned by Comte. Comte and the immediate generation following did not successfully implement the formal structures for this new religion of humanity, and secularization—that is, the waning of religious affect—was moving forward unabated. This was not bad in and of itself, but the side effect was that the old morality of the fire and brimstone of the church pulpit was eroding as well, and in the modern world there were more social problems even as economic well-being was improving for the majority. Functionalism in Parsons’ hands was dedicated to finding and resuscitating the value basis for the alleviation of human suffering as men and women are enveloped in a supportive infrastructure, namely, the humanity of the group. Following Durkheim, who theorized that the old mechanical solidarity of tight-knit groups and the development of an overarching collective conscience was fragmented and likely gone forever, there nevertheless was a quest for functional alternatives, in essence seeking a modern social solidarity, namely
While Gouldner hints at a religious dimension of Marxism, Parsons (1968: 331–332) is more explicit, stating “Religion here is interpreted as a functional universal of societies, so I should not hesitate to call Marxism-Leninism, as it is institutionalized in communist societies, a ‘secular-political religion’.

This attempt by Parsons and the functionalists to seek and revivify morality in the new era of organic solidarity characterized by unhealthy individualism is, for Gouldner, a functionalism shot through with religious convictions. Gouldner reads Parsons as seeking a functional alternative for the long lost mechanical solidarity of old, and on this basis any morality would do. The paramount concern for Parsons is the shoring up of a tenuous social order, and this work contains at its root a religious zeal, with Parsons serving as functionalism’s priest in much the same way that Comte envisioned himself the archbishop of the new religion of humanity. But Gouldner takes no pleasure in unmasking the religious roots of Parsonian functionalism. He states “Although I am not ‘religiously musical’—to borrow Max Weber’s term—I do experience this exercise in righteousness as somewhat repellent. ...If I disapprove of Functionalism, it is not because it has a religious dimension [for Marxism has one, too], but because of the kind it has, and most especially because of the kind of morality it seems to embody” (Gouldner 1970a: 264). 1

Gouldner, like most self-respecting left-leaning to radical intellectuals, must always be on guard against the invocation of spirituality in the classroom or in their writings because, to be blunt, spirituality taints a person as “unintelligent,” and this is the last thing any person of learning wants to be tagged with (Lindholm 2014: 136).

Parsons and the functionalists see society as godlike, much like Durkheim’s notion that society is God in his study of primitive religion among the Arunta tribe. This informs Parsons’ deeply pious conception of society, and the norms and values providing whatever solidarity is left in a fracturing modernity are sacred. For Goffman, with the rise of organic solidarity the individual and his subjectivity become a new object of worship. But for Parsons, he and his

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